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TAGS: [ECPS](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: MEDVEDEV ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AND THE RULE OF
LAW

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Medvedev has publicly spoken out twice in recent weeks about supporting press freedom in Russia and the rule of law. While maintaining that the government would be responsible for upholding the rule of law with respect to the mass media, he also stressed that publishers and editors must be respect moral and cultural norms. Beyond the rhetoric, Russian national television remains under strong government influence, a situation that experts predict will continue. Meanwhile in Moscow, official actions against smaller media outlets show that the rule of law will continue to be used against them that offend Russian political or cultural sensibilities. End Summary.

Medvedev on Freedom of the Press and the Rule of Law

¶2. (U) In two major addresses this month, Medvedev combined the themes of press freedom, rule of law, and social responsibility. In a June 5 address to German political leaders in Berlin, Medvedev said that "media freedom needs to be protected, and this protection needs to be enshrined in the law." He tempered these remarks by noting that there was also a responsibility for publishers to "preserve moral and cultural values" in the mass media, including on the internet. In a June 11 address to the World Russian Press Congress in Moscow, he told the assembled journalists that "our immutable guidelines, now and in the future, are the construction of a just and responsible society, respect for human rights, freedom of the press and freedom of speech and, of course, ensuring the supremacy of the law."

Two Media Outlets Under Official Pressure

¶3. (SBU) In Moscow, the application of the rule of law edged two small media outlets towards closure. On June 5, four officials from the Federal Service for Mass Media conducted an unscheduled audit of The eXile, a raunchy English-language satirical newspaper. AMCIIT Mark Ames, the editor-in-chief, wrote in a blog that the officials asked questions about the paper's content (including about columns by Edward Limonov, leader of the banned National Bolshevik Party) and found several administrative violations for which they fined him the equivalent of USD 25. According to Ames, news of the audit had sent his investors and advertisers "running for the hills," and that the paper's debts would now force the paper to close. The inspectors have not yet made any decisions based upon the content of the paper, but could issue an administrative warning and issue a fine if they determined that the paper had violated the law against promoting extremism, drug use, or pornography.

¶4. (SBU) In a separate case, a Moscow district court on June 6 banned the "Ingushetia.ru" website after ruling that it qualified as a mass media outlet and that it had disseminated

extremist material. The website, which is registered in the United States, continues to function, and it is not clear if the court decision will have any practical effect. According to press reports, the apartment of Kaloi Akhilgov, one of the lawyers representing Ingushetia.ru, was searched for two hours by police on May 29, an action he claimed was motivated by his defense of the controversial site.

Television Remains Under Political Pressure

15. (C) Against the backdrop of Medvedev's rhetorical support for press freedom, conservative television host and commentator Aleksey Pushkov, distinguished by his sharp critique of the U.S., expressed disappointment to us over the "too tight control" that continued to be exercised over the national television channels by the political leadership. Medvedev's ascendance had not produced an easing in the media atmosphere, he noted, with certain topics clearly off-limits, including any discussion of the relative political balance in the Medvedev-Putin power "tandem" or speculation over either leader's personal life. None of these restrictions were promulgated in writing, Pushkov commented, and there were changing standards that made avoiding "red-lines" more difficult and increased the tendency toward self-censorship. Pointing to earlier pieces that he had aired on the then-newly elected President Putin and his success in consolidating power, which by 2003 had become too provocative to touch, Pushkov said any analogous effort to dissect the early days of the Medvedev presidency was unthinkable.

16. (C) While adamant that the Kremlin (and now White House) were too conservative in its approach, Pushkov juxtaposed his interest in seeing more critical coverage to the apolitical

tastes of Russian television viewers. Noting that the most provocative political show of privately owned Ren-TV captured less than one percent of television viewers, Pushkov concluded that Russians increasingly sought what their Western counterparts demanded: good entertainment. With respect to his own program, Pushkov maintained that issues of social justice elicited by the far the greatest audience-share, followed by gossipy celebrity features, and attacks on NATO expansion.

17. (C) Prominent First Channel host, conservative magazine editor, and Public Chamber member Maksim Shevchenko separately echoed Pushkov's assessment that Medvedev's first month in office had not produced any easing of television restrictions. Shevchenko conceded that he was unable to air his strongly held views over the injustice meted out to Russian Muslims, particularly in the North Caucasus and especially in the trial over the Nalchik uprising. While Shevchenko said he was convinced that all but a handful of the 85 accused in terrorist activities in Nalchik were innocent, with confessions coerced under torture, it was unrealistic to expect his government-owned television channel to allow him to air this topic. It was "too difficult to navigate," Shevchenko said, particularly in a period of uncertainty over the true power balance. A provocative political program, he noted, immediately would be seen through the prism of which clan benefited the most. While discounting Medvedev's democratic credentials, Shevchenko said he expected Medvedev to do more to address what were "second-tier" issues for Putin, such as the strengthening and "modernization" of Russian political institutions. Whatever Medvedev's future aspirations, Shevchenko dismissed a near-term change in television policy.

Comment

18. (C) While Medvedev's public pronouncements are encouraging, there has been no short term effect on media freedom. While the official actions concerning Ingushetia.ru and The eXile originated at the local level, they do demonstrate the practical effect of official pressure on the media.

